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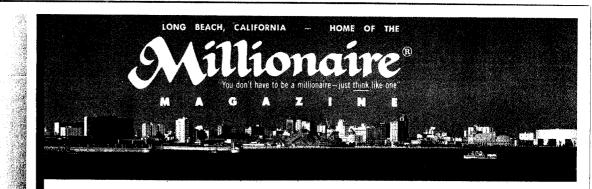


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---PRESERVATION---

by Jack Ritchie

Professor Carter had long yellow hair and a flowing mustache of the same color. When I looked into his piercing blue eyes, I had the feeling that we had met before, though I could not remember when or where,

I examined his credentials and they seemed to be in order. "Yes," I said. "We can schedule you. But you realize that the computer is booked six months ahead?"

He waved that aside. "I'm perfectly willing to use your machine after the regular working hours."

I shook my head. "Professor, the computer is in use twenty-four hours a day. And the government has priority over sixty percent of that time."

He frowned, "I can't wait six months."

"I'm afraid you'll have to. Mark VII computers are in great demand and we simply haven't enough of them in the United States."

He pulled at the mustache impatiently. "Aren't there any cancellations?"

"Occasionally," I said. "But very seldom. As a matter of fact there hasn't been one in more than a year." I glanced at the briefcase on his lap. "Of course you know that your figures will have to be re-constructed in terms of 1 and 0. The machine, in essence, can say only yes or no. Thus while the number 1 remains 1, two becomes 10, three 11, four 100, five 101, and so on."

He frowned again. "Who does that work?"

"We usually assign several of our graduate students to the job. The work is checked and re-checked by them before it is fed into the machine. After all, Mark VII's time is calculated at twenty thousand dollars to the hour—it would be pointless to waste time and money because of some simple clerical error."

He thought that over. "I'd prefer that you do that particular job. Just

you and you alone. And my work must be kept absolutely confidential."

"Professor Carter," I said patiently. "Since the university placed me in charge of Mark VII, my duties have been largely administrative. I'm sure that we have many qualified people who . . . "

"No," he said emphatically. "I want you to do it and I'm willing to pay you whatever you think your time is worth."

I studied him and became aware that I instinctively disliked the man perhaps it was more than dislike. "What is the subject of your research?"

His mouth tightened. "That is my business."

I forced a smile. "You cannot give a novel to someone to read and then expect him to remember nothing of the plot. I'm sure you must realize that it is much the same with mathematical formulae. I would at least be aware of the direction you are taking."

He hesitated for several seconds and then spoke reluctantly. "Teleportation."

I glanced automatically at the letter on my desk. The President of the University Extension in Bayfield had endorsed Carter completely and without reservation. But it might be wise to make a phone call.

Carter seemed to read my mind. "Dr. Redman, I am not insane. My subject is teleportation."

"Very well," I said dryly. "Transportation via the fourth dimension? Where to, professor? To some other planet? Or into the future?"

"Neither," Carter said. "Into the past." He put his briefcase on my desk. "Remember, Dr. Redman, this is absolutely confidential." He took a pad from his pocket and wrote an address. "You can reach me here in Bayfield."

When he was gone, I opened the briefcase and removed seven sheets

of paper. The formulae, the equations, were written in an erratic, yet authoritative, hand.

I lingered over the first page and then returned the sheets to the briefcase. No, this could not be glanced over. It would require study and thought. And eventually the computer.

At five o'clock, I drove home. Before I entered the house, I caught a glimpse of my ten-year-old son down the block playing with other boys approximately his age. Tom is towheaded and at the present time exhibits no predilections for any subjects requiring intellect. It is currently his ambition to become a cowboy and I find that faintly irritating.

After supper, I took Professor Carter's briefcase into the bedroom which I had converted into a study.

At eleven, my wife opened the door. "I thought I'd remind you that it's nearly bedtime."

I nodded vaguely.

"All right," she said. "I won't bother you. But try not to stay up too late."

It was nearly three in the morning when I gathered my sheets of notations, crumpled them, and tossed them into the wastepaper basket.

My hands were cold. Very cold.

I could reach Bayfield in two hours. Should I wait until daylight?

No.

I found my topcoat and hat and walked in the darkness to the garage.

I had never been to Bayfield before, but the professor's address contained the words Main Street and his apartment building was not difficult to find.

I climbed the worn carpeted stairs to the third floor and pressed the buzzer beside door number 31.

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I waited and then pressed it again. Finally I heard stirring inside and eventually the turn of the lock.

Professor Carter wore a dressing gown and had taken time to comb his long yellow hair. He looked at me and then at the briefcase under my arm. "Ah," he said, then let me in.

He closed the door. "Did you somehow find the time to run my formulae through the computer after all? Is that why you're here?"

"No," I said.

His face showed disappointment. "But you *are* here. Why?"

"I studied your formulae."

His tongue went over his lips. "Well?"

Through the open door of the bedroom I could see the dresser with its brushes, combs, and tonics arranged in neat precision.

He waited and when I did not speak, he laughed softly. "My formulae, they are correct, are they not?"

I took a deep breath. "Perhaps. We can't tell for certain until they've been put through the computer."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Only perhaps? Is that why you came here at this hour of the morning?"

I said nothing.

The bright blue eyes gleamed. "Then you must be aware that this is not simply passive spectator teleportation — by which one is transported into the past but cannot disturb a leaf or a blade of grass?"

"No," I said. "It obviously isn't that."

He smiled triumphantly. "Then you accept the fact that I could actually return to the past and make changes in history? Do you realize that I could prevent the assassinations of Lincoln, of McKinley, of Kennedy?"

I spoke slowly. "It may not be wise to tamper with what has been done no matter what the reasons. Let the past be."

He regarded me scornfully. "Do you actually believe that a few changes might unravel the universe?"

"Our present identity is a fragile accident," I said. "The slightest alteration of the past might eliminate our very existence."

"Nonsense," he snapped. "I could re-shape history for the better. And don't you realize that this is not just a question of transporting *one* individual? I could do the same with dozens, with hundreds, with thousands!"

He waved a hand excitedly. "I could alter the course of battles. I could undo the tragedy at the Alamo. I could reverse Custer's Massacre." He almost glared at me. "Do you realize what a modern regiment equipped with machine guns, with artillery, rockets, with flame throwers . . . ?"

I had been staring at him, perhaps waiting for something. I picked up a bronze bookend and struck him once. He died quickly. I obliterated the telltale fingerprint smudges and left the apartment.

It was a beautiful June morning; my wife was scanning a column in the newspaper. "It's been three months," she said, "And the police still haven't the faintest idea who killed Professor Carter. It looks like that's one case they never will solve."

My son had the second section of the paper. "Today's the anniversary of Custer's Massacre. In 1876 he got himself and his entire command killed."

I put sugar into my breakfast coffee. "One of your great-grandfathers was a survivor of the Battle of the Little Big Horn."

My son looked up, prepared to refute that.

"Honest," I said — and smiled. "Of course, he was an Indian." ●

